Brazil: Bush-Lula biofuel plans based on conditions worse than slavery

V. Hugo in Sao Paulo
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The recent proclamation of an "ethanol alliance" between US President George W. Bush and Brazil's President Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Silva has been hailed by apologists for both governments as an advance in the development of alternative sources of energy and a gain for both countries' economies. In Brazil, this sector is expected to record export earnings of $7 billion this year, and both countries are mounting a drive to increase the production of Brazilian sugarcane.

Little noted in the fanfare surrounding the presidential visits—Bush's to Sao Paulo on March 8 and Lula's to Camp David three weeks later—is the terrible toll that the drive to increase productivity in Brazil's sugarcane fields is taking on the country's cane cutters.

A recent study by a State University of Sao Paulo (UNESP) professor, Maria Aparecida Moraes Silva, reveals that workers are being forced to harvest up to 15 tons a day. The immense physical effort required to meet such quotas is slashing the working lives of the 170,000 rural workers in the sugarcane-producing region of the state of Sao Paulo.

In the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, the average length of time that cane cutters could remain on the job was 15 years, which was already an extremely short period, given that life expectancy in Brazil then was 62. But the alarming fact is that the working lives of these agricultural laborers is diminishing, rather than increasing. The study done by Professor Moraes Silva shows that the average working life for the cane cutters "has gone down to 12 years."

In 1980, each worker cut, on average, eight tons of cane a day. At the end of the decade of the 1990s, these workers were already cutting, on average, 12 tons a day; that is, a 50 percent increase. (*Folha de São Paulo*—September 9, 2005). The average working life of the cane cutters changes in inverse proportion to the change in the intensity of exploitation of their labor. A study by the University of Sao Paulo (USP) demonstrates that to cut 10 tons, it is necessary to deliver 9,700 blows with the *podão* - a machete-like tool used in cutting cane. A worker cutting 15 tons has to deliver 14,550 such blows over the course of just one day.

The result is the physical degradation of the worker. The UNESP study states that, due to the repetitive action and physical exertion, the cane cutters "begin to have problems with their spines and feet, muscle cramps and tendonitis." The professor concluded that "this work has provoked the destruction of the workers." The testimony that a worker, José Lúcio Oliveira, 33, gave to the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* confirms the conclusions of the study. "Last Friday, I felt pain in my shoulders and I was only able to cut 60 meters," said Oliveira, who usually cuts between 100 and 120 meters a day.

Oliveira lives with two other co-workers in a two-room house in Pontal do Paranapanema (state of Sao Paulo). They wake at 4 a.m. each morning to make the lunch that they will take with them to the cane field. At 5, they are already waiting for the bus that will take them to work, where they spend up to 10 hours in the sun. They get three breaks to eat during the day, the first at 7:15 a.m., the second at 10 and the last at 1 p.m., when their food is generally already cold, a fact that gave rise to the term *boia-fria*, which means literally, "cold grub," but is commonly used to refer to agricultural laborers.

After a day spent striking thousands of blows at the base of the sugarcane, they stop work at 4 p.m., tired, dirty and hungry. Reaching their house, they wash their clothes and prepare food for dinner and for the next day. The base monthly salary for these workers in the State of Sao Paulo is 410 reais, or approximately $205. With tremendous effort that ends up incapacitating them at an early age, the strongest workers are able to earn as much as 1,200 reais, or $600 a month.

Comparing the working conditions of the cane cutters with those of African slaves of the 19th century, the historian Jacob Gorender comments that until 1850, the length of the working life of slaves in agriculture was between 10 and 12 years. After the traffic in African slaves was outlawed, the landowners began to take better care of their slaves, and their working lives lengthened to between 15 and 20 years.

The UNESP professor states that the cane cutters have, therefore, a working life that is shorter than that of African slaves working in the fields during the second half of the 19th century. This is the case because the modern sugar mills and their big suppliers do not need to worry about preserving the lives of the salaried workers. They can buy labor power on the market and exploit it with maximum intensity until it is completely used up, to then replace it with new labor, as the labor market is filled with unemployed workers who need work to survive.

The sugar producers pay their workers by the ton of sugarcane that is cut. This makes the workers force themselves to produce the most possible, given that apparently by producing more, they earn more. Thus, by paying by the ton instead of by the hour, the owners are able to intensify the productivity of labor.

The principal benefit for the sugar bosses in increasing the intensity of work is that diminishing the amount paid for the tonnage cut and, consequently, reducing the real salary of the workforce. In the 1980s, the base rate for cane cutters in Sao Paulo was equivalent to 2.5 times the minimum wage. Today, it is equal to 1.8 times the minimum wage. Thus, with the passage of time, the profits of the bosses increases and the median real income of the workers tends to continuously fall, as they cut an ever greater quantity of cane daily. Therein lies the fundamental contradiction of the present system, as those who do not work grow ever richer, while those who work have to work more and more and still find themselves continually poorer.

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While the median cost of the manual cutting of cane is continuously declining, the tendency towards replacing workers with giant cane-cutting machines seems inevitable. And what will become of these workers? They will join the millions of unemployed who subsist on the peripheries of the big cities. The situation facing cane cutters, along with the rest of Brazilian workers and those of the entire world under the present social order, is one of increasing exploitation which leads to the degradation of their capacity to work and of their own lives, the shrinking of salaries and, finally, unemployment. It is worth remembering that many cane cutters reach the end of their careers without the right to any retirement.

The other advantage that paying by the ton has for the owners is the possibility of defrauding workers by underreporting the weight of the cane they have cut. A study conducted by Mariana Setúbal, in a project linked to UERJ (State University of Rio de Janeiro), released in July 2005, focused on the working conditions of cane cutters in the city of Campos (State of Rio de Janeiro). The research team verified that, despite the workers saying that they were being paid 0.12 reais (6 cents US) for every meter cut, the real amount they were receiving in most cases was as low as 0.08 reais. According to the study, this discrepancy was due to the fact that the measurement of cane cut was determined by a tally man, who is a close confidante of the owner.

But, in the end, what do the workers think in relation to being paid by the ton? For the cane cutters, this form of payment turned them into their own "foremen." It made the presence of a supervisor to control the pace of the work superfluous. The absence of such a work boss for these workers appeared to be a gain of a certain amount of freedom. This apparent freedom stimulated, on the one hand, the development of individuality, independence and self-control on the part of the workers. On the other hand, it encouraged competition between them, as they know that those who produce less run the risk of being eliminated from the shift. Thus, the amount harvested by individual workers in many plantations is between 10 and 12 tons a day.

In short, payment by the ton tends to divide the workers and serves an obstacle to their organization, as they tend to see their salaries as dependent solely upon their own individual efforts. For this reason, payment by the ton (or piecework in other areas of production) is a more subtle and sophisticated means of increasing the exploitation of labor power.

In the face of the growing demand for physical strength in the work of cane cutting, the search for younger workers has intensified. Aparecida de Jesus Pino Camargo, president of the Union of Rural Workers of Piracicaba (Sao Paulo), says that while the majority of cane cutters are between the ages of 25 and 40, there is an increasing number of 18-year-old youths joining the work force.

This reduction in the age of the workers is promoted by the owners, as the youth have stronger muscles, nerves and tendons than the older workers. Moreover, if the average working life of these workers is only 12 years, a 30-year-old worker who began cutting cane at 18 is already about to be discarded. For this reason, the owners are always searching for "new blood." The younger workers offer the greatest potential for the exploitation of labor.

The drive for greater productivity through the intensification of labor has been cited as the cause of the deaths of at least 19 *bóias-frias* in the interior of the state of Sao Paulo since April 2004. Nearly two years ago, in September of 2005, the Federal Public Ministry, the United Nations and the Pastoral do Migrante do Guariba (a Catholic support network) launched an investigation to determine whether these deaths were related to the precarious conditions of labor. The suspicion was that the deaths were caused by excess labor, as in three of the cases reviewed, the victims were migrants and the cause was respiratory failure. The investigation is still ongoing.

The latest death occurred on April 24 of this year. Lourenço Paulino de Souza, 20, who had come from the town of Tocantins to cut cane, was found dead at the end of the afternoon of his first day on the job, next to the bus that was to take him home.

The ex-minister of agriculture in the Lula government, Roberto Rodrigues, declared on April 30, in statement dripping with sarcasm, that the work of cane cutters is "brutish, heavy, but well paid." The sugar mill owners sound the same note as the ex-minister. "The salary is much higher than the average rate of compensation in Brazil," mill owner Maurílio Biagi Filho told the daily *Folha de São Paulo*.

Equally repugnant are the opinions expressed by the professor of agronomy at UNESP, Ulisses Rocha Antoniassi, who said, "the worker is not obliged to work a lot; he works to earn more, because he earns according to productivity."

These gentlemen ignore the fact that, aside from the existing productivity targets on the plantations, workers are also pressured by the seasonality of the work. As Wilson Rodrigues da Silva, president of the Rural Employees Union of Guariba put it, "people earn 700 to 1,200 reais (US $350 to $600) only during the harvest period. But what about afterwards?"

The efforts of the ex-minister, the mill owner and the professor to defend the current order based on profit is incapable of hiding the harsh reality: so long as the cane cutters are subjected to conditions worse than those of the 19th century slaves, capitalists linked to the worldwide productive network and the industrialization of cane production together with the commercialization of its derivatives continue increasing their profits, with the support of the governments of their respective countries.

The lawyer for Brazil's Social Network for Justice and Human Rights, Aton Fon, states that the current agreement between Brazil and the US on the production of biofuel makes it more difficult to enforce minimal rights of workers in this sector, given that the government's concern now is to increase the planting of cane, and this does not favor better conditions of work for the cutters.

Fon said, "The worker should be able to count on the government to exercise oversight, establishing regulation. But in this case everything is complicated because the government is on the other side. Rather than guaranteeing the health of workers, the state, at this moment, is more interested in guaranteeing the production of ethanol, in guaranteeing that the mill owners have greater access to credit. At this moment, the defense of the workers is basically silenced."

Lula and Bush, united with big capital, are agreed on the fundamental necessity for subordinating workers to conditions of life worse than those of the slaves. Their governments are acting in a way that can only deepen the contradictions of a society, which produces, on the one hand, the destruction of the lives of millions of workers, and on the other, the uncontrolled enrichment of a small layer of the world's population.

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